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ABSTRACT

What can philosophical Taoism teach us about interpersonal conflict and effective approaches for dealing with it? Examination of selected portions of the R. Hendricks translation of the "Lao-Tzu" or "Te-Tao Ching," and experiences recorded in fieldnotes while a member of a Taoist commune suggest a four-point protocol for managing interpersonal conflict based on the counsel of philosophical Taoism. One point is essentially prescriptive, and the others are essentially cognitive schemata for locating one's "self" while fighting and for informing one's actions accordingly. First, don't fight: if a person is not contentious, no one will be able to be contentious with him. Second, recognize conflict as merely a part of a larger whole, and don't become identified just with it alone. Assume a wider, more relativistic perspective. Third, realize that "fighting to get closer" is a conceivable way of creating solidarity with another person or within the context of a group. Conflict viewed this way becomes a potential vehicle for strengthening interpersonal relationships and promoting continuity. Fourth, acknowledge "exhausting the yang to return to the yin" as a viable frame of reference for construing conflict. The idea is to exaggerate conflict as a way of experiencing harmony (its opposite) and becoming peaceful. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SR)

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CONFLICT AND TAO

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CONFLICT AND TAO

Position

What we have here is a look at conflict from an Asian point of view by a person who is not an Asian. As an Anglo-American man in my middle years I am going to give a particular gloss to conflict that will be informed most of all by my personal experiences as a member of Anglo-American culture. Even though I have lived on the edges of this culture during certain periods of my life (Haight-Ashbury, late 60s, early 70s), and even though I have participated in some of the movements that have called this culture into question (advocating a women's studies program on a college campus), I still represent -- in the way I have positioned myself here -- the Anglo-American view. I don't see how it could be otherwise.

Voice

What I am going to try to do in this essay is explore the idea of conflict (from an Asian [text] and non-Asian [interpreter] point of view) by undertaking a limited exegesis of a particular text of an Other culture, and I am going to do this knowing full well that what occurs during the process is just as much an exegesis of my self.[1] With this in mind, this essay turns on the question, What can philosophical Taoism teach us about managing interpersonal conflict?

The main move of this essay, then, is to consider a particular text with the initial purpose of learning about conflict from an Other/Asian point of view, and then creating a protocol for managing conflict based on what has been learned. But, again, I also want it recognized that the exegesis of this text plays through the exegesis of my ongoing experience of self in a way that will shape my interpretation of the text and the rendering of my self -- "the discovery of me" (Goodall, 1991a, p. 275). Put simply, I am more or less convinced that I cannot truly understand an other person **qua** person or an other culture **qua** culture; that all I may be able to do is unpack the native ways that reside in my experience because I take seriously R.D. Laing's (1967) assertion that it is impossible to experience the experience of an other person and, by extension, the experience of an other culture. Instead, again following Laing, we come to the conclusion that all we can do is depict our experience. The study of other cultures, then, is merely another way, another gloss, for, ideally, disidentified or egoless attempts to construe "present experience." This is not self-indulgent. It is merely personal. I don't see how it could be otherwise.

Text

Now that voice (first person) and position (Anglo-American) have been established, we must consider the context which is the text to be considered. The text, in this case, which is the

context, in this case, is Robert G. Henricks' (1989) translation of the **Lao-Tzu** or **Te-Tao Ching**.

According to Henricks, in late 1973 archaeologists made an important discovery in the small village of Ma-wang-tui which is located near Changsha (Hunan Province) in south-central China. In the tomb of a man who was buried 4 April 168 B.C., many manuscripts were found with funerary items. Two of these manuscripts are now the earliest known versions of famous Chinese classics -- the **I Ching** and the **Lao-tzu** (pp. xiii-xiv).

Henricks informs us that two **Lao-tzu** manuscripts were discovered. They are referred to as Text A (chia) and Text B (i). Text A, on the basis of character style ("small seal" instead of "clerical") and the personal name taboo (avoiding the name of the emperor during whose reign the manuscript was written or copied), is older than Text B (p. xv).

Henricks mentions four characteristics of the Ma-wang-tui texts of the **Lao-tzu**. First, they are not "radically" different from the later or "received" versions of this Chinese classic. The differences are "subtle." For instance, the Ma-wang-tui texts are more "grammatical" than later editions (pp. xv-xvi).

Second, the two-part division of the "standard texts" is reversed in the Ma-wang-tui texts of the **Lao-tzu**; that is, the two divisions comprised of chapters 1 through 37 (Tao/"the Way") and chapters 38 through 81 (Te/"Virtue") in most texts are turned around in the Ma-wang-tui texts so that they are referred to as the **Te-Tao Ching** instead of the more familiar **Tao-Te Ching** (p. xvi). One explanation for this reversal is that it is "simply the result of packaging." Henricks credits Yen Ling-feng with this explanation. It is suggested that the Ma-wang-tui texts were recorded on bamboo strips before they were copied onto silk -- one bundle of bamboo strips for part I and one bundle of bamboo strips for part II. It is possible that the part I bundle was put into a box first, with the part II bundle on top. The next copyist would be quite likely to begin with the top bundle, thus reversing the original order (p. xvi-xvii).

Third, for all intents and purposes, the Ma-wang-tui texts read as "one continuous whole" without the chapter divisions of the more familiar editions. Henricks believes that the "present eighty-one chapters were determined around 50 B.C." (p. xvii).

And fourth, the order of the material as it is found in the Ma-wang-tui texts of the **Lao-tzu** would not be much changed were it divided into the eighty-one chapters of "present-day" versions. There are, however, three exceptions: what we know as chapter 24 is placed between chapters 21 and 22 in the Ma-wang-tui texts; chapter 40 appears between chapters 41 and 42; and the chapters that to us are 80 and 81 come between chapters 66 and 67

in the Ma-wang-tui texts. Henricks (1989) explains that the first two exceptions "make sense in terms of the flow of ideas; why chapters 80 and 81 are placed where they are in the Ma-wang-tui texts remains unclear" (p. xviii). Also, when Henricks cites the "standard" text of the **Lao-tzu** he is referring to the Wang Pi (A.D. 226-249) version.

These seemingly minor differences do not diminish the importance of the Ma-wang-tui texts of the **Lao-tzu**, however. It is probably the case that our received versions of the **Tao-Te Ching** are not the texts used by the Chinese commentators (Yen Tsun, fl. 53-24 B.C., Wang Pi, A.D. 226-249, and Ho-shang Kung, "dated by many to the third or fourth century B.C.") associated with these versions (Henricks, 1989, p. xiv). Consequently, it is important that we have the Henricks' translation of the older Ma-wang-tui texts of the **Lao-tzu/Te-Tao Ching** (p. xiv).

Method

The purpose of this essay is to focus on issues having to do with interpersonal conflict management. Two principal sources will inform what I write: (1) the counsel given by the **Te-Tao Ching** from my reading as a westerner of the translation by Robert G. Henricks (1989), and (2) the ethnography of a Taoist commune that I studied in the United States, especially what I have recorded about its co-founder and leader Gia-fu Feng. (Gia-fu's translations of the **Tao Te Ching** [1972] and the Inner Chapters of the **Chuang Tzu** [1974] are reasonably well-known.)

To reiterate, this essay will turn on the question, What can philosophical Taoism teach us about managing interpersonal conflict? What I am proposing is an exploration of interpersonal conflict management that will consist of an exegesis of Henricks' translation of the **Te-Tao Ching** combined with insights gained from my experiences as a participant observer in a Taoist commune located, at the time of my residency, in Colorado. (Gia-fu died in 1985 and the commune no longer exists.) Themes from these two principal sources will be identified and commentary will be provided. The purpose of this undertaking, once again, is to arrive at a suggested protocol for managing interpersonal conflict based on the counsel of philosophical Taoism.

Text as Other

Is it post-modern nonsense to take a text, this text, as Other? Is it silly to consider Henricks' translation of the **Te-Tao Ching** and imagine the rock-steady hand of a wizened Chinese elder brushing Chinese characters onto silk? Is it less than academic to marvel at what it apparently means to encounter the thought of minds so ancient and so wise? No. I don't think so. It is not post-modern nonsense to do this. It is not silly or less than academic. It is, instead, a simple acknowledgement

of what I bring to the text when I come to the text and take the text as Other. So, the text is Other. The text is Other for me. If this is the case, then what does this mean?

I have already asserted that the process of considering Henricks' (1989) translation of the **Te-Tao Ching** is also the process of considering my personal experience during the process of considering this text; that an exegesis of the text is an exegesis of me. When I turn to the Ma-wang-tui texts (A and B) provided by Henricks and imagine the person or persons who copied them prior to their placement in a tomb during the year 168 B.C., I am also turning to my self and the successive instances of my experience which seem to be my self while I encounter the text -- which seem to be my self whenever I encounter anything -- which seem to be my self. The discovery and expression of this personal experience is what it means, for me, to turn to the text so that a turning to the text is a turning to me, and a turning to me is a turning to the text. This apparent doublespeak is the outcome of acknowledging the perpetual reflexivity that inheres in textual exegesis that is also referred to as the hermeneutic circle. Everything runs together -- the text that I apprehend and experience as the text, and the text that I take to be my self apprehending and experiencing the text. In a "real" and unassuming way I copied the text, I buried the text, I found the text at Ma-wang-tui. I am also the text that I found, and I become the text as I find it.

When I turn to this text, then, when I take Robert G. Henricks' translation of the **Te-Tao Ching** in my hands, turn to the first page and look with my eyes, what happens? When I come to this text as Other -- the one found and the one I am finding -- what occurs, what describes the process? Reader-response critics like Stanley Fish claim that there is no inherent, permanent, objective meaning in a text. Instead, the meaning of a text, any text, is the meaning that emerges from the process that takes place when the text and the reader/perceiver interact -- so meaning quite literally becomes "meaning" in quotation marks. What gets "emphasized [is] the predominance of the audience's critical reaction to the text over the intention of the author or a presumption of inherent meaning" (D'Souza, 1991, p. 72). Consequently, when a text is created or in some way brought forth, the primary locus of activity is the creator. But when a text is perceived or apprehended, the primary locus of activity is the perceiver. What becomes privileged, then, is the very personal and private experience of the person who is the present and principal locus of activity, the point of reference, that for our purposes, is the experience of perceiving and interpreting a text.

If this is the case, then it seems virtually impossible to discern the meaning intended by the creator of a text. The question of intention is rendered undecidable and therefore,

philosophically speaking, meaningless. Apparently, the best I can do when I consider a text as text -- as Other -- is guess or speculate about the intention of the person who created it on the basis of what I would have intended had I created the text at hand, or at least to try to imagine what the person who created the text might have intended when the text was created. Therefore, the original intent, or the intent that initiated the expression of the text in the first place and from which the initial and subsequent meanings of the text are derived, cannot be definitively determined. So, in essence, the text at hand "means" what I would have intended the text to "mean" had I created the text at hand.

But it is also the case, I think, that the text at hand does mean something, and that the person or persons who created it undoubtedly had something in mind -- a purpose, an intention, a meaning. The assumption is that an impulse of some kind is behind the creation of a text, and that the impulse or motivation for the creation or expression of a text implies a meaning of some kind on the part of the creator. It may be reckless to equate, more or less, intention and meaning, but it seems intuitively sensible to imagine something meaningful in the intention to create or express a text. And it is this assumption about the meaningfulness of intention behind a text that implies an intended meaning for a text.

But even here the argument is self-referential. It is not just that the text is thought meaningful because it was probably intentional, but that the text is intentional because it seems more likely for a text that is not artifactual to be intended. However, the greater likelihood of an intended and thus potentially meaningful text is only an assumption premised on how I am presently making sense of my experience. Simply put, were I to create a text -- this essay, for example -- I would do so, in part, with a purpose or intention and some idea of "meaning" in mind, even though this "meaning" may be worked out as I go along.

Consider this passage from an essay by Bruce Kapferer (1986):

> The world as we live it is not founded on some kind of solipsism which views only the individual self and self-experience as real. The everyday world of human action is not constituted after the manner of Mrs. Christine Ladd Franklin, an eminent logician, who, as Bertrand Russell reported, wrote in a letter that she was a solipsist -- and was surprised that there were no others. The reality of oneself and the reality of individual self-experience -- or to put it another way, a consciousness of being in the world -- is formed within an experiential reality composed of consociates and contemporaries with whom individuals assume both a degree of commonality in experience and a shared

> framework of understandings through which they become aware of their own and other's experience. The basis of Mrs. Franklin's not unexpected surprise rested on the fact that the validity of her position depended on its being shared by others, an expectation that was contravened by the very position she took but that paradoxically confirmed her as a solipsist. (p. 189)

I include this quotation partly for its entertainment value and partly because it helps me consider my role as an interpreter of a text. Although it seems to me that personal experience is most often the final arbiter of what "reality" signifies for each of us as we construe our experience and try to make sense of it, I believe it is also the case that the nature of existence is not completely tied to my awareness of it. I sit here in this moment fully convinced that people are going about their business in Brazil even though I have no direct experience of what they are doing. Brazil and the people who live there do not suddenly spring into existence when I arrive in Rio de Janeiro or when I pick up the telephone and engage in a conversation with someone who supposedly lives there. In my opinion, this is not what solipsism is about although the passage from Kapferer (1986) seems to suggest it when he discusses what is real and the predicament or paradox of Mrs. Franklin. It is true enough, I think, that Brazil does become real for me when I imagine the place or read about it or travel there because then it becomes known to me in terms of my own experience, but Brazil does not suddenly cease to exist or stop being real for others when I turn my attention to something else. What can be "known" and what is "real" are not necessarily synonymous ideas and experiences. Confusing the two can create problems and I think Kapferer may be confusing them, but I am certainly willing to allow that the confusion is fully mine. At any rate, what he writes is useful because it provides an incentive to come to terms with this issue for ourselves. So, if solipsism means that the self and self-experience are all that can be known, verified and expressed, I essentially agree with this position. But it also seems to me that what Kapferer writes about "consociates," "commonality in experience" and "a shared framework of understandings" can be made to be the case as well.

What I am trying to do here is work out my cognitive position vis-a-vis the **Te-Tao Ching** as Other. What I want to know is how to approach this text and accomplish the exegesis I have in mind. As a solipsist, who contends that there is no self other than present and personal experience which is the extent of what can be known and verified and expressed, how can I take up this classic discovered at Ma-wang-tui, evidence from an Other culture and an Other time, and construe from it a protocol for managing interpersonal conflict that will hold for still an Other culture in yet an Other time? -- a culture and time where my present experience/self seems to be positioned.

With this question asked, it now occurs to me that there is another way of positioning myself to interpret the Ma-wang-tui texts by incorporating the intersubjectivity suggested by the words "consociates," "commonality in experience" and "a framework of shared understandings" in the passage by Bruce Kapferer (1986) with an idea/experience reported by Gregory Bateson (1979). While absorbed in the process of writing two manuscripts during the same period of time, Bateson experienced a shift of perspective. He described it this way:

> I was transcending that line which is sometimes supposed to enclose the human being. In other words, as I was writing, mind became, for me, a reflection of large parts and many parts of the natural world outside the thinker. (p. 5)

In this passage it seems to me that Bateson provides a way for finding my way to the Ma-wang-tui texts by virtue of the experience of "transcending that line which is sometimes supposed to enclose the human being." Mind, as a reflection of the natural world "outside the thinker," becomes the connection, the meeting place and common ground for an encounter with this ancient classic as Other. Mind, and the experience of mind as a reflection of the natural world, makes it possible to imagine the experience of an Other culture and what may be a simultaneously personal and transcendent sense of the Ma-wang-tui texts. Bateson appears to be suggesting that I may come to know more than my self and my personal experience, that it is possible to exceed the "line" of "human being" and experience insight into the larger and more encompassing natural world through the processes of the mind. Mind, then, is not merely a part of my individual nervous system and thus an important instrument for making meaning of only my experience, it also came from and is connected with a larger sense of reality that represents itself as the natural world. So, because my mind and the minds that created the Ma-wang-tui texts may be taken to be manifestations of the natural world, we are able to discern one another (e.g., I may be able to get a sense of the Ma-wang-tui texts) because, despite all our differences, we are similar through our identity with a realm "outside the thinker."

This idea is appealing. It is even convincing. I actually believe it, to some extent. The transcendence implied goes nicely with a text that is sometimes considered mystical in nature. Still, for this essay at least, I prefer my essentially solipsistic view (a view, incidently, that does not necessarily preclude transcendent experience); that is, what I get from the Ma-wang-tui texts when I approach them as Other is, fundamentally, who I take my self to be while I interpret them; and who I take my self to be while interpreting the texts is, fundamentally, the on-going perception and expression of my present experience. And then, thank goodness, there is Page Smith (1990) who, after railing a bit against Derrida and other deconstructionists, asserts that it is perfectly feasible to suppose that a text simply means what it

says.

So, at this point, my cognitive position vis-a-vis the **Te-Tao Ching** is still problematic. (Otherwise, why Page Smith?) Exactly how to approach this particular text as Other is not clear to me, and there is still the conviction that I cannot render this text as intended. Again, given who I take my self to be, the only construal of this text that will have any authenticity is a construal centered in and expressed from my present experience -- which is my present self. This seems like a clear position. Maybe it is. It also seems problematic. However, I am not going to try to "work it out" anymore. Instead, I am going to move to a narrative about conflict and Tao. I'm going to pretend that I know what I'm talking about.

Narrative

In simple terms, interpersonal conflict is expressed disagreement (Stewart & D'Angelo, 1988). It is legitimate, I suppose, in light of the way I have positioned my self for this essay, to turn to a textbook about interpersonal communication and appropriate this simple description of conflict. The description of conflict as expressed disagreement is a Western view. It is culture bound. It represents a white and middle-class perspective. It represents the way I have positioned my self for this essay. I could also turn to books that concentrate specifically on interpersonal conflict, Hocker and Wilmot (1985) for instance, and, as a middle-aged Anglo-American, detail some of the implications of expressed disagreement still fully within the context of Western culture as I experience it. This is merely more of the same. I am only playing out my native ways. I am not going to do this.

What I want to do, instead, is play out my native ways through a turning to the East. I want to come to the East as a person from the West and consider their view of conflict through my eyes and in terms of my experience. To do this I begin with and rely heavily on a single point of reference, an essay titled "Toward a Dialectics of Harmonization" by Chung-ying Cheng (1977) and discover, without surprise, that a discussion of conflict also includes a discussion of harmony. In the West, we tend to divide up the world. In the East, the world is perceived more holistically. In the West, we can speak of conflict and harmony separately. In the East, conflict and harmony are taken together as closely related expressions of human experience. Consider this passage from Chung-ying Cheng's (1977) essay:

> I shall informally explain the notions of harmony and conflict for the purpose of our discussion. For an intuitive point of view, harmony means the following: For any two distinctive co-existing or succeeding forces,
> processes or entities, if there are mutual complementation and mutual support between the two, so that each depends on

> the other for strength, actuality, productiveness and value, then we can say that these two form a harmonious whole and an organic unity. In contrast, conflict means the absence of harmony between two distinctive, different or not different, forces, processes or entities, to the extent that each tends to cancel out the other, contradict the other, harm the other, or even perhaps destroy the other. As a consequence, there is no unity nor [sic?] harmony underlying the conflicting elements. (p. 211)

So conflict, again in simple terms, is the absence of harmony; it is the lack of an underlying unity. This view, from the East, seems fully compatible with the view, from the West, of conflict as expressed disagreement. Even though conflict and harmony are discussed together, they can, it seems, exist separately. But Chung-ying Cheng (1977) continues:

> From this explanation of harmony and conflict, it may appear that we could have two different or two distinctive things which are not mutually conflicting and yet there is no harmony between the two. We then have a situation of indifference, irrelevance and non-relation, which is neutral to both harmony and conflict. But we must notice that in the course of human experience a situation of indifference, irrelevance and non-relation does not remain quite a neutral relationship, for such a situation is either more conducive to harmony or more conducive to conflict. Thus one might therefore talk of potential harmony and conflict as versus actualized harmony and conflict. It might be thus assumed that given any two different or two distinctive things, either these things tend to harmonize with each other or they tend to conflict with each other. (pp. 211-212)

Now conflict and harmony are joined as features of a whole; one does not exist without the other. Consequently, when it comes to the realm of human affairs, when it comes to matters of human discourse and relationship, there exists an ever-present tendency toward the experience of harmony or conflict, manifest or not. Finally, Chung-ying Cheng asserts that there is

> no simple formula whereby all types of harmony and conflict can be uniformly characterized or described. Objectively and realistically speaking, we cannot even specify causes and conditions of harmony and conflict without specifying the contexts of relationships in which harmony or conflict arises. (p. 212)

These excerpts from the essay by Chung-ying Cheng (1977) provide a cognitive schema for considering interpersonal conflict; they give us a departure point for working out a way of looking at interpersonal conflict from an Asian point of view. Now that we have an idea of how conflict (and harmony) are conceived generally

within the discourse of Chinese philosophy, we can turn to Henricks' (1989) translation of the **Te-Tao Ching** and identify some of the passages that seem pertinent to the task of developing a protocol for managing interpersonal conflict based on the counsel that can be inferred from philosophical Taoism.

Here are some excerpts gathered from the "Te" (Virtue) portion of the Ma-wang-tui texts (A and B) that may be construed to pertain to conflict:

> Thus, "The strong and violent do not come to a natural end."
> I will take this as the father of my studies. (Ch. 42, A)
>
> Tranquility overcomes heat.
> If you're quiet and tranquil you can become the ruler of the world. (Ch. 45, A)
>
> When the world has the Way, ambling horses are retired to fertilize [fields].
> When the world lacks the Way, war horses are reared in the suburbs. (Ch. 46, A)
>
> Their clothing -- richly embroidered and colored;
> While at their waists they carry sharp swords. (Ch. 53, B)
>
> Therefore, the words of the Sage say:
> I love tranquility, and the people of themselves are upright; (Ch. 57, B)
>
> The female constantly overcomes the male with tranquility. (Ch. 61, A)
>
> Is it not because he is not contentious,
> That, as a result, no one in the world can contend with him? (Ch. 66, B)
>
> Though they might have armor and spears, no one will display them. (Ch. 80, B)
>
> The Way of Man is to act on behalf of others and not to compete with them. (Ch. 81, B)
>
> Therefore, when weapons are raised and [the opponents] are fairly well matched,
> Then it's the one who feels grief that will win. (Ch. 69, A)
>
> The Way of Heaven is not to fight yet to be good at winning -- (Ch. 73, B)

All of these passages appear critical of conflict; the yin or female bias of philosophical Taoism seems clearly evident in these selections from the Ma-wang-tui texts. War, corruption, and

contention are not valued. Strife and open confrontation are not occasions for celebration. Instead, they are reasons for grief.

Perhaps the basic counsel that can be derived from these excerpts and used to inform a protocol for managing interpersonal conflict is most simply stated in the assertion "Don't fight!" It does seem reasonable to suppose that interpersonal conflict would be difficult to sustain if the experience is not valued by the culture or social group and disagreements are thus handled without fighting. Differences between persons do seem inevitable, but it is not inevitable that these differences be acknowledged and managed in a strident, contentious manner.

This counsel may even be considerably practical. If, in interpersonal relationships, we are able to monitor our behavior and label our emotions as many believe we are able to do (Wilson, Hantz and Hanna, 1989), then we can, in theory at least, choose not to fight.[2] And, if we choose not to fight, then it is difficult, in theory at least, for others to fight with us -- if we are not contentious then it is harder for others to be contentious in return. Let me illustrate this with a little story.

One summer, while an undergraduate in college, I worked for the Department of Transportation in New York State as a highway inspector. My job was to monitor construction practices and make sure that "proper procedures" were followed. This particular incident concerned the quality of gravel that was being used to fashion shoulders along a stretch of interstate. The gravel being sent from the pit was of poor quality, it was mostly silt, and it would probably wash away in the first rain. So, I began turning the trucks around and sending them back to the pit. The truck drivers didn't mind. They got paid whether they dumped their gravel at the site or not. It was quite a different matter for the contractor, however. Every time a truck returned to the pit with its full load of so-called gravel it cost the contractor a considerable amount of money. It wasn't long before I saw a large luxury car speeding in my direction, leaving a high plume of dust in its wake. The car literally "screeched!!!" to a halt just inches from where I was standing. A big man jumped from the car, snatched a cigar from his mouth, and bolted my way. When he reached me, he put his nose against mine and began yelling. For some reason, I didn't return his aggression and pretty soon he sputtered to a stop. When he stopped yelling I scooped up a handful of what the trucks had been dumping and let the silt sift through my fingers. The man got back into his car and headed for the pit. After that the trucks brought gravel instead of silt.

I don't know what motivated me to behave the way I did during this incident. It might have been fear. The man was so big and so angry. But somehow, while he was yelling at me, I was able to retain the composure necessary to make the silt sifting gesture

at the end of his tirade. And it must be emphasized that what I faced, quite literally, nose to nose, was verbal aggression, not physical aggression. The situation would have been radically different had the big man started hitting me instead of yelling at me. Nevertheless, what I do know is that my apparent calm and absence of expressed hostility during this incident did seem to soften the big man's aggressiveness and move us away from an escalation of conflict in the manner counseled by the **Te-Tao Ching** and expressed in the admonition not to fight. It may be that conflict needs something to push against, some form of resistance to be sustained. If this doesn't occur, it sputters to a stop.

Here are some excerpts gathered from the "Tao" (the Way) portion of the Ma-wang-tui texts (A and B) that may be construed to pertain to conflict:

> By not elevating the worthy, you bring it about that people will not compete. (Ch. 3, B)
>
> Water is good at benefiting the ten thousand things and yet it [does not] compete [with them]....
> It is only because it does not compete, that therefore it is without fault. (Ch.8, B)
>
> Take emptiness to the limit;
> Maintain tranquility in the center. (Ch. 16, B)
>
> It is only because he (the Sage) does not compete that, therefore, no one is able to compete with him. (Ch. 22, B)
>
> Tranquility is the lord of agitation....
> If you're agitated, you lose the "lord." (Ch. 26, B)
>
> Those who assist their rulers with the Way,
> Don't use weapons to commit violence in the world.
> Such deeds easily rebound.
> In the places where armies are stationed, thorns and brambles will grow. (Ch. 30, B)
>
> As for weapons -- they are instruments of ill omen....
> Therefore, the one who has the Way, with them does not dwell....
> Weapons are instruments of ill omen.
> When you have no choice but to use them, it's best to remain tranquil and calm.
> You should never look upon them as things of beauty.
> If you see them as beautiful things -- this is to delight in the killing of men.
> And when you delight in the killing of men, you'll not realize your goal in the land....
> When multitudes of people are killed, we stand before them in sorrow and grief.

When we're victorious in battle, we treat the occasion like
a funeral ceremony. (Ch. 31, A)

The submissive and weak conquer the strong.
Fish should not be taken out of the depths;
The state's sharp weapons should not be shown to the people.
(Ch. 36, B)

Again, all of these passages appear critical of conflict; they seem fully compatible with the passages selected from the "Te" (Virtue) portion of the Ma-wang-tui texts. In other words, the "Tao" (the Way) and the "Te" (Virtue) portions of the Ma-wang-tui texts (A and B) do not counsel a contentious, competitive, combative way of living. We are not to be truculent, pugnacious and bellicose. To repeat, even if we must take up arms, there is to be no delight in these circumstances. We are told to treat victory as if it were defeat, to mourn instead of celebrate.

The images of philosophical Taoism given us by the Ma-wang-tui texts are soft and yielding images. This is the case for both the "Tao" portion and "Te" portion of these texts. For instance, in the "Tao" part of the texts, we are counselled to be like "water" which benefits the ten thousand things and is without fault because it does not compete. And the cleanly swept courtyards but empty granaries, the war horses in the suburbs, and the fancy clothing with weapons in full view alluded to in the "Te" part of the Ma-wang-tui texts, and echoed in the "Tao" part, are not images or ways of living that are valued by philosophical Taoism. Quite the contrary. Horses are to be in the fields fertilizing crops so the granaries may be full, clothing is to be plain meaning the people are not corrupt, and weapons are to be kept out of sight -- and we come, once again, to the admonition not to fight.

The simple admonition not to fight is certainly not the extent of what we can learn about managing interpersonal conflict from the Ma-wang-tui texts of the **Te-Tao Ching**. This revered text of philosophical Taoism is a rich source of information about human affairs and enlightened living, and it provides us with a wider view of what to do when it comes to interpersonal strife. Consider these lines from this ancient Chinese classic:

Agreement and angry rejection;
How great is the difference between them?
Beautiful and ugly;
What's it like -- the difference between them?
The one who is feared by others,
Must also because of this fear other men.
Wild, unrestrained! It will never come to an end!
(Ch. 20, B)

This passage from Chapter 20 of the **Te-Tao Ching** expresses another dimension of philosophical Taoism that can be useful as a frame of reference for construing interpersonal conflict. It introduces into our discussion the principle of relativity and the ideas of mutual conditioning and mutual dependence that are important features of Chinese philosophy. A relativistic perspective places all entities of cognition and experience within an interdependent context so that every distinction made is conditioned by and dependent on other acknowledged distinctions. Consequently, there can be no beauty without ugliness, and no ugliness without beauty; there can be no agreement without rejection, and no rejection without agreement. Chuang-tzu, the other central figure of philosophical Taoism after Lao-tzu, developed these ideas quite extensively. Chung-ying Cheng (1977) reminds us of this when he writes:

> According to Chuang Tzu, all things in the world are mutually dependent and mutually conditioned. Distinctions of values are our personal decisions which have no objective basis, whereas distinctions of facts are equalizable but merely limited manifestations of the unlimited and indeterminate Tao. (pp. 216-217)

And then, continuing his discussion of the "metaphysics of harmony and conflict in Taoism," Chung-ying Cheng writes:

> For all things in the Tao are constituted by relativity and mutual transformability and [are] thus reducible to oneness and identity at the same time. Distinction and differences between things being ontologically transcendable, conflict, antagonism or hostility arising from distinction and difference are naturally ontologically transcended and absorbed into the Tao. Consequently, there is no ontological status for conflict and antagonism in the enlightened eyes of the Tao. (p. 217)

In other words, the person who is sensitive to the Tao does not become identified with any single manifestation of the whole. Antagonism and conflict "in the enlightened eyes of the Tao" represent only an incomplete expression of human experience. Therefore, it is a mistake, from a Taoist point of view, to be fully seduced by antagonism and conflict (or any other particular manifestation of the whole, for that matter) so that thought and behavior take only these circumstances into account and thus construe what occurs from this very narrow view. In some cases, of course, it is reasonably easy to remain benevolently unidentified with the situation and think and act in a manner that is informed by this relativistic perspective. But in other cases, when the intensity of the situation seems extreme, the more global and relativistic view advocated by philosophical Taoism is not as easily maintained and inappropriate identification with the circumstances is much more likely to take place. When this occurs,

one's vulnerability to the unenlightened ways of the world is greatly increased. For instance, while watching my mother die it was difficult to keep her death from appearing to express and contain all that my mother had been during her lifetime. Death can be such an overwhelming experience and completely crowd out the life part of a person's existence. A relativistic view sees life and death as expressions of the Tao and so death does not crowd out life and life does not crowd out death. Instead, they are mutually conditioned by one another, mutually dependent on one another, and mutually identified with one another. This is the case for all expressions of the Tao.

There is a well-known Chinese story about a farmer and his horse. The horse is a magnificent creature and the farmer's neighbors tell him again and again how fortunate he is to own such an exquisite animal. "We'll see. We'll see," says the farmer. One day the horse runs away and the farmer's neighbors lament and console the farmer because of his loss. "We'll see. We'll see," is all the farmer says. A few days later, the horse returns leading a herd of healthy horses and making the farmer a very wealthy man. The farmer's neighbors are overjoyed and congratulate the farmer. The farmer makes his customary reply. "We'll see. We'll see," he says. Not long after this, the farmer's oldest son tries to ride the horse and falls and breaks his leg. The farmer's neighbors are dismayed and offer the farmer their sympathy. The farmer says, "We'll see. We'll see." What happens next is that an army arrives in the region conscripting the oldest sons for military service in the villages it marches through, but the farmer's oldest son is not taken because of his broken leg. Not surprisingly, the farmer's neighbors are quick to point out his good fortune. "We'll see. We'll see," the farmer replies.

This story, which continues in this vein and which I have very freely told,[3] demonstrates a relativistic perspective. The farmer's neighbors, because their view was constrained by each separate event, vacillated between delight and despair. But the farmer, because he possessed a relativistic understanding of what occurred, was able to live in a more enlightened way -- he was not needlessly battered about by his circumstances. The farmer in this story appears to represent the person Chung-ying Cheng (1977) is referring to when he asserts:

> That a man [woman] who realizes the identity and equality of all things will be most happy, and in this sense of happiness will reach the highest form of harmony, namely his [her] equality and identification with the Way. (p. 218)

So, the relativistic perspective of philosophical Taoism is another way to manage interpersonal conflict; it is a cognitive schema for making sense of strife that is empowering rather than debilitating. The person who is able to realize the "identity and equality of all things" while in the midst of a fight will not

be victimized by differences and disagreements. Instead, interpersonal encounters that lack harmony will be framed within the larger context of the Tao. Chung-ying Cheng (1977) writes:

> To be able to transcend and at the same time to embrace all things in the spirit of the Tao, a man [woman] will not encounter conflict and will eliminate conflict wherever and whenever conflict arises. (p. 218)

It may even be the case, then, that conflict, interpersonal conflict, becomes a means for identification with the Way.

This may have been what Gia-fu Feng, the co-founder and leader of a Taoist commune I lived with a number of years ago, had in mind when he aggressively confronted commune members and guests. He sometimes characterized his confrontational way of communicating as "verbally breaking legs," a reference, perhaps, to the physically brutal methods reputedly used by some Zen masters to shock their students into enlightenment. Gia-fu offered two explanations for the interpersonal conflict he seemed to frequently and deliberately instigate. One was the practice of "fighting to get closer," and the other was the principle of "exhausting the yang to return to the yin." Both of these explanations are pertinent to our discussion of managing interpersonal conflict from an Asian point of view, and can be added to what we have addressed about conflict based on the Ma-wang-tui texts of the **Te-Tao Ching**.

It seems to me that Gia-fu said that "fighting to get closer" occurred during "struggle meetings" in Communist China. Apparently, it was a kind of decision-making process whereby open confrontation was recognized as an important part of establishing social policy. I also remember him mentioning something about meetings where "self-criticism" took place. The purpose of "self-criticism" was to publicly acknowledge a personal wrong-doing of some kind. As a member of the commune, it was my impression that Gia-fu combined his ideas about the practices of "struggle meetings," "self-criticism," and "fighting to get closer" into his own special style of confrontational communicating. He appeared obsessed with making the commune grow into a "one hundred family village," and he seemed to believe that his personal brand of aggressive discourse would accomplish this end. The effect was quite the contrary, however. On the basis of my observations, most of the people associated with the commune, with the exception of a small core group, didn't appear to appreciate morning meditation sessions that were more like intense group encounter meetings with Gia-fu as the belligerent therapist. But it is perfectly conceivable that Gia-fu truly believed in the practice of "fighting to get closer" as a means of creating community solidarity and attracting new members. It is also conceivable, and more germane to this discussion, that the reason Gia-fu fought with us was to help us identify with the Way.

Gia-fu's second explanation for the interpersonal conflict he orchestrated into commune life -- "exhausting the yang to return to the yin" -- is based on the concept of reversal or reversion, a common idea in Chinese philosophy and philosophical Taoism. In simple terms, it is the proclivity of an extreme state to transform or revert into its opposite. The Taoist adage to avoid extremes, excesses, and extravagance is probably derived from this idea about the manner in which natural processes unfold. Chung-ying Cheng (1977) states that "Reversion is the opposition of the opposite: it is the derivation of opposite from an overextended position" (p. 216). While it seems more in the spirit of philosophical Taoism to avoid the threshold where this reversion takes place by living simply and cultivating contentment, it is not unreasonable to suggest that one might deliberately pursue a particular state by exaggerating its opposite. In other words, what Gia-fu may have been doing when he pushed a disagreement to exaggerated and sometimes bizarre extremes, even physical violence on one occasion, was attempting to reach an interpersonal state where the intensity of the fighting reverted into the peacefulness and tranquility of a settled heart. Although there were a number of persons who believed that Gia-fu's intensely disputational discourse was an expression of his own pathology, there were others who were convinced that he was deliberately confrontational for the purpose of turning anger into love. If it is the case that everything contains the "seed of its opposite," as I once heard asserted in a class about the **I Ching** at the University of Washington, then Gia-fu may also have been "verbally breaking legs" to transform the apparent chaos of conflict into the apparent order of harmony. The volatile atmosphere that permeated the commune whenever Gia-fu was present may have been his way of preparing the group for quieter times and eventually setting in motion a more peaceful way of living in the commune. Here is another little story. The ebb and flow of this personal encounter with Gia-fu may illustrate his masterful way of "exhausting the yang to return to the yin."

One morning during breakfast, Kristaline remarked: "Those crunchy things are good." She was referring to the grape-nuts she had pinched from Todd's bowl. "Chemicals," Gia-fu said. Todd picked up the cereal box and read us the ingredients: wheat, malted barley, salt, yeast, and "fortified" with niacinamide, vitamin A palmitate, vitamin B_6, riboflavin (vitamin B_2), thiamine monomitrate (vitamin B_1), vitamin D_2, folic acid, and vitamin B_{12}. Carlton said that except for the salt, they were not bad. I added that of the commercial breakfast foods, which are notoriously empty of nutrition, grape-nuts was one of the best. This led to a discussion of my diet, which Gia-fu initiated. Gia-fu was aware from previous conversation that my father had died because of heart disease and he wanted to know if his death had influenced my eating preferences. He said he was interested because he too was 60, the age of my father when he finally succumbed to his third heart attack. "What did he eat?" Gia-fu asked. Ample amounts of meat, eggs, cheese, and other dairy products, I replied. Rich foods. I

explained that his circulatory system had become irreparably clogged. Atherosclerosis had damaged his heart beyond the practical feasibility of surgery. "Exercise?" Gia-fu queried. Yes, I answered, he exercised. Usually with survey parties in connection with his work as a civil engineer. Until his later years, at least.

During the course of this conversation, I volunteered information about my relationship with my father in addition to what Gia-fu requested. For instance, I briefly described a confrontation that "nearly came to blows" when I was an adolescent. And I remembered be severely spanked for lying, the only time this ever occurred, when I was eight or nine or younger. I also revealed that after his second heart attack, my father and mother drove from Syracuse, New York to Seattle, Washington, to visit me and my younger sister who also lived there at the time. It was a trip my father had wanted to make; mother feared the long stretches of open road in his condition. And I told Gia-fu that my father and I had reached an "understanding" with one another while he was visiting.

Gia-fu exploded into one of his tirades, yelling, among other things, that my father should have thrown me out of the house when I defied him. He called my father a "sissy." He supported this observation by shouting that my father should have called me and told me he was dying. He said I should have gone to him instead of the other way around. I said that I hardly perceived my father as a "sissy." I characterized him as "strong and silent." Gia-fu immediately attacked this. He considered it typically "American," and contrasted it with the behavior of his father who maintained control through outbursts rather than silence. Then Gia-fu, no longer yelling, said my father should have expressed himself more. I agreed. Everyone else in the kitchen was silent.

In the most immediate aftermath of one of his diatribes against my father, which I took as a means of attacking me, Gia-fu turned to me and said gently: "Not everything I say is reasonable or true."

After about 10 minutes of another attack against my father, Kristaline appeared to intervene on my behalf by interjecting that her father used to make her cry by lecturing her. Gia-fu was accommodating toward Kristaline. He had said earlier during morning meditation that she was the only person he didn't give "shit." Kristaline and Gia-fu talked about her father for a while, and Gia-fu used this opportunity to celebrate the virtues of her father against what he believed to be the shortcomings of mine. He concluded that Kristaline's father, unlike my father, would probably live a long time. At this point, the intensity I experienced with Gia-fu just a few minutes previously had softened almost completely. We were now quietly discussing B.F. Skinner while I washed breakfast dishes at the sink.

After finishing the dishes I went to my room. A short time later, I returned to the kitchen to see what I owed for long-distance telephone calls. Onny had posted the bill. While I was doing this I noticed Gia-fu helping himself to a bowl of grape-nuts.

This story, based on fieldnotes I recorded while a member of the commune, provides a glimpse of what it was like for me to live with Gia-fu. Again, the ebb and flow of our interaction that is apparent in the account above may indicate the reversal that is expressed in "exhausting the yang to return to the yin." I can do no more than speculate about whether others experienced Gia-fu in a similar manner when they encountered him during the course of one of his confrontational episodes; whether they too sensed the yang/yin reversal in operation. This appeared to be the case for the core group of his followers, but I do not "know" their experience and so I cannot speak for them. What I can say is that the incident above may have been a precursor to what was to follow because one day during morning meditation near the end of my stay on the compound with the commune, Gia-fu's aggressiveness stopped getting stuck in my stomach. Something broke free. I ceased to react viscerally to his harangues. On this particular day, wrapped in my blanket and wrapped in the dark before dawn, a simple peace came over me. Yang became yin. I felt I had followed Gia-fu to the very end of his screaming and abusiveness to where it was quiet and peaceful and perfectly still. It might have rained that day. I might have stayed in my room and thought about what had happened.

Exit

We began this essay with the purpose of deriving a protocol for managing interpersonal conflict from an Asian/Chinese perspective, and we undertook this task by examining selected portions of the Ma-wang-tui texts, translated by Robert G. Henricks (1989), and some of my experiences in a Taoist commune. Our question has been, What can philosophical Taoism teach us about interpersonal conflict and effective approaches for dealing with it? We have also considered certain dimensions of what it means to undertake the exegesis of a text as Other.

We are now in a position to summarize what has been evoked during the process of undertaking this task. Four approaches to the management of interpersonal conflict informed by a particular reading of philosophical Taoism have been suggested. One is essentially prescriptive, the others are essentially cognitive schemata for locating one's "self" while fighting and for informing one's actions accordingly. These suggestions for dealing/being with conflict are related and interdependent, although each may appear to be enacted on its own. Adumbrated, the four approaches are:

1. Don't fight. Don't be contentious, and no one will be able to be contentious with you.

2. Recognize conflict as merely a part of a larger whole, and don't become identified with just it alone. Assume a wider, more relativistic perspective.

3. Realize that "fighting to get closer" is a conceivable way of creating solidarity with another person or within the context of a group. Conflict viewed this way becomes a potential vehicle for strengthening interpersonal relationships and promoting community.

4. Acknowledge "exhausting the yang to return to the yin" as a viable frame of reference for construing conflict. The idea is to exaggerate conflict as a way of experiencing harmony, its opposite, and becoming peaceful.

Finally, it can be mentioned that this protocol for the management of interpersonal conflict appears conflicted itself. The admonition not to fight and the practice of "exhausting the yang to return to the yin" seem contradictory and in tension with one another. But the relativistic perspective of philosophical Taoism, a perspective that takes a wider view and can embrace "fighting to get closer" as a complement of harmony, unites the two without removing the contradiction. Consequently, the protocol as it stands encompasses the countervoice of its own suggestions, and thus may also be an expression of the unlimited and indeterminate Tao.

Notes

1. Incidently, I should also mention that when I refer to my "self" I mean only a "convenient fiction" (I'm sure I've read this some place) that is used to make sense of personal experience -- Goffman's "changeable formula" (cited in Leeds-Hurwitz, 1989) for construing present thoughts and emotions. In other words, what I take to be my "self" is basically an apparent present-tense sense of embodied awareness, a reasonably useable, yet fluid, principle of organization. It is a conception of "self" (and quotes should be used each time) that calls into question the stability of subjective experience (see Goodall, 1991b).

2. The idea of choosing our emotions and the manner in which they become expressed in our behavior appears fully consonant with an Existentialist point of view. Jean-Paul Sartre (1989) writes: "The Existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion" (p. 441).

Notes (continued)

3. I don't recall where I read this story or when I first heard it told. It seems to me it is a well-known story in Chinese folklore.

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